

AREEBA'S WIGS AND OTHER STORIES

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities

Morehead State University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Art in English

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by

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Accepted by the faculty of the Caudill College of Humanities, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Art in English degree.

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AREEBA'S WIGS AND OTHER STORIES.

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This thesis is a creative thesis. It is a collection of short stories which revolve around one particular town. Each story is told through a different narrator.

The collection as a whole shows the importance of identity within a community as defined by those within the community. That identity is defined as a subjective reality created by the narrators.

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## Bascom Grady Tells Why Politics Are So Important

Come in. We're not really open yet, but we will be in a few minutes. Have a seat at the bar, I'm just opening the blinds to get some light in here.

Lou Ann. Honey, bring out some beer nuts for us if you don't mind. Lou Ann's the misses. She usually doesn't work much in here--just the weekends and the summer months when we're busier and she doesn't have to teach. She teaches eighth grade Science at the middle school, so she's got time on her hands right now.

I don't think I know you. You from around here?

Lou Ann. Hurry up with those beer nuts, will you. Huh? Well, bring some pretzels then. There's some beneath the sink next to the wash bucket.

So you're working at the college, huh? A teacher like my Lou Ann? What do you teach? So you been here long? Well, where are you staying, then?

Lou Ann, they're in a box--no, not the brown ones. That's that disinfectant for the toilets. It's in a blue one--blue and red. Has "pretzels" written on the side.

I guess a small, eastern Kentucky town is a new experience for you, huh? There's not a lot to do here,

but the people are pretty good.

How about a beer? God, I get to talking and I don't even remember that's why you came in here in the first place. First one's on the house. Bud or Lite?

Anyway, like I was saying, there's not a lot to do around here. We got the lake, of course, but unless you like camping and fishing and skiing and stuff like that, then it's not much use. You can rent one of those pontoon boats they got over there, but you'll be lucky to make it back to the dock in some they've got. The state's supposed to re-do most of that next year--buy new boats, new equipment, renovate the lodge. They have a golf course, too, but it's just nine holes.

The lodge gets lots of business in the fall. People come from all over to see the leaves turn. The campground will be full and the lodge has a Sunday buffet starting in late August.

Thanks, Lou Ann. You hungry yet? I know. I can read the clock.

Have some pretzels? Lou Ann doesn't like to eat lunch before noon, but I'll get her to leave here pretty soon. I like to eat by eleven-thirty myself--to beat the crowd, sort of. There's only one decent place in town to eat now, and everybody goes there for lunch at the same

time, it seems. Bunch of Goddamn lawyers.

It's true. We used to have four or five good restaurants right here in the middle of town. The corner drug was the last to go. Most all the town's stores are law offices now. Wal-mart out at the by-pass nearly killed the whole place. Those fast food places out there got the restaurants, I don't know where all the lawyers came from.

But where's my manners. I'm Bascom. Most around here call me Billy, though. Nice to meet you.

Like I was saying, the only good place left in town to eat is Areeba's. It used to be this drug store type of place--they had everything. They sold feed, and pharmaceuticals, and had the best hamburgers you could get anywhere--still do.

Areeba, she used to own the place, left it to her girls when she died. One of them ran off though, got married to some guy from up north. They got killed in a car wreck on their honeymoon coming back from Perry county.

Her other daughter, Randy I think it is, left about a year ago. Susan McKinzie's family bought the place and really turned it around. Most of the stores in town were already having trouble by then. Susan turned it into a

full fledged restaurant, complete with table cloths on the tables and a jukebox in the corner. It's maybe the only place here I can think of that's almost the same as when I was growing up here.

That's right. I was born in the old hospital that used to be next to the fire station where Branding Bowling and Belcher's offices are now. They tore down that hospital in seventy-eight I think--that year we got so much snow. The roof caved in and a bunch of the patients threatened to sue. The state had given money already for the new hospital that they eventually built, but it was taking too long to get the contractors going. That snow helped speed things up.

A bunch of politicians got in trouble over that one. The new hospital was supposed to be completed in two years, and it took them almost four. You believe that? There was this big quarrel over Mayor Matthews' brother's contracting company handling it. It seemed like a conflict of interest to some, but mostly it was political.

Lou Ann, you ready for lunch yet? I'm getting hungry. You hungry yet?

Anyway. Most of that scandal didn't come out until years later when the Mayor ran for re-election. See, he



was a pilot and when he got re-elected in eighty-five, he flew his single engine Cessna back and forth over town election night celebrating. Me and Lou Ann lived in an apartment above what used to be Ben Franklin's, it's where the Steven's practice is now, and it sounded like he was going to knock the shingles off. He was flying right above court street, parallel with these buildings here. I just knew he would catch a power line or something.

They never did figure out what caused the plane to go down. The mayor's wife, Leigh Jeffers from up Little Bull, got killed. The mayor lost his left foot and three fingers off his right hand. Judge Cranville's daughter, Pam, got killed. She dated the mayor's brother, the one I told you about with the contracting company. They were going to marry that summer.

When the crash happened though, the paper looked into all that hospital business again, and this time the numbers didn't add up. So after losing his future wife, nearly a brother as well, Sammy Wade Matthews--that's the mayor's brother--got twelve years for embezzling the state out of almost a million dollars. And you know what? He didn't even get a scratch in that crash.

Okay honey. Lou Ann's going to go across the street

now. You want anything? Get us two cheeseburgers with everything, Lou Ann. And fries. How about a refill on that beer?

Most people from around here didn't pay as much attention to that one as the rest of the state did. It was big news in the Lexington and Louisville papers. Things like that just happen in small towns, they tried to say. But it wasn't an eastern Kentucky thing like the papers tried to make it out to be. There's corruption everywhere.

And I'm not defending the stealing of state money or anything like that. He should have gone to jail. It's just that there's a good side, too, you know? Mayor Matthews did a lot for this town years ago. His family owned the old train station back when freight used to run through here. They did a lot to help build the place. They even donated that land where the college is, for nothing. I'm sure they got a tax break or something though.

But it's important to have people that know people running a place. If a small town doesn't have some larger connections, it'll just stay a small town forever and won't get anything new.

We got that new middle school Lou Ann works at just

five years ago. Her class is one of the first ones to ever be in there. That's something we can tell our grand kids about. Her cousin on her mother's side, Doc Franklin, got her that job. He used to be on the board of education before the state took that over last year.

There was a little bit of a scandal in the high school a couple of years ago, too. This music teacher, he's from somewhere up Cane Creek but I don't know many of them, fondled some young girl--Pastor Yeager's daughter. Supposedly there's a dozen witnesses, but all of them were in that class and you know how rumors grow.

But he skipped town--took his wife with him. They haven't caught him yet either. His wife was from up north somewhere so they've been looking all over up there for them. It doesn't look good if they do catch them, I say. Pastor Yeager's threatened to kill them both.

Lou Ann's sure taking her time. She probably stopped in to check on those new earrings at the pawn shop. She's waiting for them to come down to what they're really worth. I told her we'd get them if Jimmy, who owns the place--it's right next to the building where the Turner's new practice will be if they ever finish renovating it--will come down a couple hundred. He's had them for nearly six months now.

We got a race track too, I almost forgot about that. It's on the county line, about ten miles north of here. They have harness racing during the harness season, and in the fall they race stock cars. There's always the simulcasting and they can even serve liquor and beer on Sunday in there--don't even ask me how they get to do that. It's a mystery to everybody.

The Tucker boys put that place in three years ago. One of them used to be the state representative. They own the only night club in the county too--the Dance Floor. They built the track near the county line to attract more people, plus it was the only flat piece of land they could get that was big enough.

You are a Democrat, aren't you? That's an important thing in this county. You won't be able to vote on anything if you're not. Now the next county up, it's Republican. We get along with them okay, but there's been some bad blood in the past.

Did you know Kentucky was split north and south during the civil war? It's true. The line went right between these two counties. Most people say the feud started then--the rivalry I mean. It's not really a feud unless you kill some people over it.

They don't like us some say because of the Dirty

Black River flowing north. You ever heard of a river flowing north before? All our shit and everything else that we dump in it goes to them. That's where all these bordering counties get most of their water, that and private wells.

If you're a Republican you might think about living just across the line--it's only nine or ten miles to the college from there. Like I said, it's the only way you can vote on anything of any importance. You can vote on the Presidential election though, I guess.

See that guy across the street selling newspapers? The one in the football helmet? That's Larry. He's from up north somewhere too. He's not exactly right.. Some think he did something to that Blackburn boy from a few years ago--the one that disappeared. Mrs. Blackburn sure thought so. She threatened to kill Sheriff Prater if he didn't arrest him. That boy never did turn up.

Well it's about time, Lou Ann. I'm starved. I've been telling our friend here about the place--he's new you know. He teaches at the college, and...now where did you say you were from again? Republican or Democrat?

## Areeba's Wigs

After school I went to Areeba's. It was the best restaurant in town, and it was where my closest friends, Lee and Randy always were. They were Areeba's twin daughters and worked the restaurant part of the drugstore after school. Areeba ran the beauty parlor side, back behind the curtains. The twins worked back there some too, the beauty parlor part, but only after hours when Areeba could show them what to do without customers being around.

Most everyone in town thought I was the other daughter that Areeba never had. They said I looked more like Randy than Lee did. I was just happy to have someplace to go, and I didn't mind helping out when they got busy--waiting tables or cleaning the bar that ran the length of the restaurant. They'd let me work for tips sometimes when I needed some money, like that time Mom got the flu and I had to buy that medicine for her.

The Beauty parlor was where Areeba spent most of her time. She ran the whole place, but mostly the restaurant ran itself. She ordered the food and did the payroll and stuff, but the twins and the other waitresses did everything else. The beauty parlor was the busiest part,

anyway. Areeba would let me watch her styling hair and washing and perming and teasing. She had three chairs, and there were three sinks. There were posters on the wall of styles and types with beehives and celebrity names with cigarettes and smiles a mile wide. Beneath the posters were the styrofoam heads, covered with the hair of movie stars--Marilyn Monroe, Doris Day, and Jane Russell.

There were other chairs, too, for waiting and catching up on the latest *Housekeeping*, or *Homemaker* with cookbooks and astrology and summaries of the latest soaps. You could sit there under the dryers and talk about your cousin's new, red convertible or who was getting their roots dyed that week.

The twins were nothing alike. Lee was blonde and outgoing. Randy had darker hair and was a quiet type. Boys were always coming over to talk to Lee, and Randy would sort of stay to herself. She was real skinny like me, and looked young as me, not like she was about to graduate from high school. I had three more years to go, and was in no great hurry to get there. Anyway, there was really no place to go.

I sat at my usual spot at the center of the bar in front of the soda fountain. It was easier to get refills

there. Lee looked up from her magazine as I spun around on my red, cushioned stool. I guess Randy hadn't made it in from school yet.

"Hey, Suze," Lee said in her smiling way. "Want a burger?"

"Nah. Not hungry. Where's Randy?"

"I don't know. Look at this." Lee had one of those beauty magazines and plopped it down in front of me as she filled my cup with ice for my cherry coke.

"New York Beauty Academy?"

"Yeah. I'm goin' there when I graduate," she said with a big smile. "And don't you go blabbin' about it neither. That's where all them famous hair designers started out, New York City."

I thought how lucky Lee was, getting to go to New York. A place of movie stars and the rich and famous. Lee would fit right in. I imagined her working on the hair of some famous movie star, combing and teasing and spraying and making it just right. She would smile her flashing smile and look concerned the way she does and tilt her head and twist that curl from her bangs the way she told me to do when I wanted to keep someone's attention.

A couple came in and Lee went to get their order, so



I stepped through the curtain to the beauty shop. Miss Rowlands was leaving and Miss Braxon was looking for a magazine as I hopped up into the chair by the movie star heads.

Areeba said hi and asked about school like she always did. She wanted to know if my homework was all caught up. I sucked on my coke and poked at the movie star heads with hair pins from the counter beneath them. Marilyn was in New York. Jane Russell was probably there, too, waiting for Lee to show up and do her hair.

Areeba turned her attention back to Miss Braxon, perm today. That woman tried something new every week. Still looked like a rat's nest to me. Some people's heads are just hard to deal with, Areeba told me once.

I got down from the chair and looked through the magazines by the hair dryers. No new ones. I slipped a dryer down over my head as I imagined I was Lee talking to one of my celebrity friends in New York. We talked about our wardrobes and the new shoes we had just bought and where we got our poodles groomed. Randy came in and sat down beside me. I was just about to ask her what she would do when she graduated when Miss Jameson came in.

Miss Jameson was a retired school teacher. She was barely five feet tall, but she made up for it in

meanness. They say she was the meanest eighth grade Math teacher there ever was. Flunked her own daughter and kept her from going to high school that year. She scowled in our direction and walked over to Areeba who was finishing putting that smelly perm stuff on Miss Braxon.

"Areeba, I'm going out of town today and I need you to set my hair."

Areeba stalled while she tried to finish Miss Braxon. Miss Jameson was one of those people who thought they should always get special treatment. You know, they expected you to drop whatever you were doing just to accommodate them. And Areeba, not being one to argue and Miss Jameson being such a regular customer, would always try to do just that--accommodate.

"I'm going to the city for Sister's wedding. Don't know why I bother. She'll just kill this one, too. Most of them only last about two years. That last one, that Smith fella, was around almost three. I liked him, too. He smelled like cranberries."

That was the only time I ever heard Miss Jameson say she liked anything. Miss Braxon got up mouthing "I'll wait over here" so Areeba could help Miss Jameson into her favorite chair.

"Sister hasn't seen me in more'n four year. I didn't make it to the last wedding."

Miss Jameson was asking Areeba what she thought about this growth on her leg, and I was thinking amputation, when Randy and me got up and went back into the restaurant. I needed a refill and wanted to ask her what she thought about New York City. We talked a lot, usually. I knew things about her that she said she never told nobody. She even let me read her diary some, wrote in it every day she said, sometimes. She was easy for me to talk to, and wasn't always too busy like Lee was.

Lee was always doing something. She had a boy sitting close to her, or had something to do or somewhere to go. And, wherever she was, was the place to be. Things always seemed so easy for Lee.

But Randy and me, we were a lot closer. Like when it was just the two of us in the store we would pretend we were other people in town. Randy was really good at impersonating them. But when other people were around she just never seemed to know what to say.

We grabbed a stool and Lee acted like we weren't there. The other girls who were working the restaurant were stacking burgers for the four boys in the corner booth. Lee was talking to her old boyfriend Tommy Ray at

the end of the bar next to the front door, sitting near the big front window. She had a straw in her mouth and was twirling her hair with her little finger. I elbowed Randy and pointed at them. She spilled my coke when she saw it was Tommy Ray.

"Guess they're back together," I said.

"Looks like it." She looked down at her shoes the way she does when she gets uncomfortable. I wondered if something was bothering her and started to ask her about it when I blurted out about Lee moving to New York. She seemed relieved like she knew about it already, but wasn't sure.

"She'll do okay up there," she finally said.

"What will Areeba think?"

"I'm sure it'll be okay. If not, Lee'll just go anyway."

"Why don't you go with her, Randy? I can come visit when I get older," I said with a smile, trying to cheer her up.

Randy looked down the bar at Lee and Tommy Ray and then back to her feet. She fidgeted around on her stool and I watched her while I worked on my coke. She seemed like she was scared of the whole world, like it was somebody who wanted to keep her from living her life--

from being who she wanted to be.

"She tells me less and less these days, Suze. I guess I do the same. I just can't talk to her like I can you. I can never tell her what happens. Like about Tommy Ray."

"What about Tommy Ray?" I asked, putting my coke on the bar.

"Well, I thought they were broke up for good. Least that's what he told me in science class. He said that he had put up with her long enough; that she was just a tease, a big flirt who couldn't stay with one boy longer'n two weeks. And I guess I'm just stupid for believin' him."

She drew in a long breath and took another drink from her coke. At the end of the bar, Lee and Tommy Ray were giggling and Lee was whispering something in his ear. Randy continued, "So last weekend, when I stayed all night over at Ellen's, I..."

"Yes?"

"I went for a ride in his pickup with him."

This was the closest thing to a date that Randy had ever had. Course there was that time she met Billy at the movies, but he ended up sitting with Linda instead. But Tommy Ray? He was the basketball captain, the most

popular guy in school. Why would he go out with Randy?

"We just went driving around. He showed me where everyone goes to drink and I even had a beer." She smiled a little now, and it seemed like she was relaxing a bit, like it was one of those times when it was just the two of us in the restaurant.

"And you know what?" she continued. "He got a little drunk so I drove us back to Ellen's, but we stopped by the lake first."

"No."

"Yes we did."

"Did you go parkin' with Tommy Ray?" I asked in a whisper.

"Yes. And you know what?"

"What?" I said.

"We did it."

I couldn't believe it. I looked down the bar at Lee and Tommy Ray and tried to imagine him and Randy in his pickup and couldn't. He looked back at us and must have realized for the first time that Randy was there because he got up quick to leave. Didn't he expect to see her in her mother's own store?

Lee came down to where we were sitting. Randy swiveled around on her stool and looked toward the boys

in the corner booth. Lee reached beneath the bar and placed her magazine in front of her, lightly thumbing backwards through the pages.

"Tommy Ray wants to go to New York with me when we graduate," Lee said like it was no big deal. "Think I ought'a let him?"

No one said a word. Randy turned back to Lee on her stool and her straw scraped the bottom of her cup as she moved it around in the ice to get the last few drops. I looked down at my shoes, I didn't know what to do.

Lee shrugged her shoulders and walked from behind the bar over to where the boys in the corner booth were. Randy and me turned on our stools to watch her. She put her order pad in her back pocket, her pencil behind her ear, and touched one of the boys on the shoulder as she asked him how his burger was. One of the boys waved at Randy and she got up and walked over to them.

The curtain parted from the beauty parlor and Miss Jameson came out. Her hair looked perfect, too perfect. I watched her closely as she passed the table where Lee and Randy stood. Lee had both her hands on the table top and shifted her weight from one leg to another, like she was walking in place. Randy chewed her straw and twirled her hair with her little finger. I tried to figure out

what was different and realized that I was the only one who noticed. It wasn't Miss Jameson who had just walked by. It was Doris Day.



## The Hop

Slump ran his fingertips along the edge of the blue vinyl seat back. The quilted ridges were smooth and clean to him--like fresh Armorall. He fingered the holes of the plastic window and impatiently rubbed the heels of his boots against the clean, dark-blue floorboard. He impatiently sighed and looked over his shoulder at his car parked on the gravel near the edge of the highway. He smacked his open palm hard on the seat's middle to check for dust.

The trooper's eyes flashed in the rear view mirror. He paused momentarily and returned to his report.

"You clean this car yoreself, or someone else do it?" Slump asked.

No reply.

"This yore car, or you jus' pick one out ever mornin'?"

The trooper didn't pause, he just kept on writing. He didn't seem happy to Slump, but they never do.

"How 'bout shuttin' off this light back here? I'm blinded."

"Date of birth?"

"Man, you got my license."

"Ever been arrested before, Mr. Mathews?"

"Once."

"For DUI?"

"Armed robbery. I'm a dangerous outlaw. That there license is only one of my aliases. I'm wanted in twelve states. Real name's James. Jesse James."

The trooper flipped the light off and got his car moving. Slump's impatience was growing. He wanted to get to the jail as soon as possible. "Can't get out if you don't get in," he thought as the trooper finished writing and got the car moving.

He looked back at his old Ford again. Only two miles from the Hop. If he'd just made it there he'd been okay, he thought. Not like he was in any real trouble, anyway. But he could've avoided all this if he'd just made it to the Hop.

It was only a parking lot. But as long as Slump could remember, it was where everyone went to hang out. There were other hangouts too, like behind the carpet center or on Abbot's ridge, but the Hop was the only place people went that was in town. It was a place to see everyone and a place to be seen.

It was a meeting place, too--a place to park your car and get in with some friends and have a few beers.

And back when the county was still dry, it was where most would meet to decide who was going to drive to Perry County and buy the beer for the weekend, or the night, or whenever.

On a summer's night, the lot would be full. All the girls would be in from college, nothing else to do, and everyone would stand around trying to figure out where that night's party would be. Back in its heyday, there was always someone there, or close by, or on their way. "Still too early tonight," Slump thought to himself, looking through the back seat window as they passed the deserted lot.

The trooper pulled his car into the back parking lot behind the courthouse and opened the door for Slump to get out. They entered the building and walked down the hall to the elevator that led to the second floor jail.

Slump remembered the last time he was on this elevator, been a couple of years ago now--the night UK beat UCLA in double overtime. That night they were on the hospital graveyard. That night started at the Hop. Seems like all of them did.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What's goin' on, Slump?"

"Bustin' one. Got a paper?" Nelson handed him one

through the car window and Slump quickly rolled it up. He lit it with his ash tray lighter and stepped out of his car to pass it. They were the only two in the parking lot, and it was well past dark.

"What's the line on the game tonight?" Slump asked through the smoke.

"Eighteen. Gonna kill them Bruins tonight."

"Goddam twenty-seven ain't even got the thing on. Bastards said they was gonna carry all the away games. Somethin' about it bein' a big game, or their contract with CBS or somethin' stupid like that."

"Like any of us is goin' to California to see the fucker."

"Fuckum," Slump answered, taking another hit.

Nelson sat down on the hood of Slump's Ford and propped his feet on the rusty chrome bumper. "Seen Coach and those guys at the corner liquor. Said they's goin' to the graveyard to listen to the game on the radio. Wanna go?"

"This piece of shit won't even make it up the goddam hill, what with all the rain we had this week."

"They'll be comin' by here in a minute. They got some green. Been to Salyersville."

"The blue trailer?"

"Naw. That place ain't got shit. I heard they had some hash oil but now it's all gone."

"The drive-thru?"

"Yeah. I hear the stuff's wicked."

"Let's go."

"To the graveyard or Salyersville?"

"Don't care. Let's go to the graveyard first and if it's any good, we'll go to the drive-thru later."

Slump and Nelson got in the Ford and were about to pull out of the lot when Coach, Mumbly, and Zig pulled in. They were in Mumbly's Bronco, and Coach explained where they were going, and who else was likely to be there. He asked if Slump wanted to get in with them. He didn't really invite Nelson. Nelson was a couple of years younger than everyone, and had a reputation for being a tag-along. But nobody objected when he and Slump both climbed in.

It took Mumbly three tries to get his Bronco up that muddy, rutted-out road. Slump thought they were going over the hill for sure, once. But, when they reached the top, parked, passed around some beers, rolled one and switched on the radio, everything was okay.

Tater, Special Ed and Gotcha were already there and walked down to where the Bronco was parked. Everyone was

climbing out and Mumbly kicked his fender. "Piece of shit Ford."

\* \* \* \* \*

Standing in the elevator with the trooper, Slump thought back to how unseasonably warm it had been that night on the graveyard. It must've been around tournament time, late February or early March, but he remembered it felt like fall. "Not much snow either, that year," he nearly said aloud. "Or was that the year before?"

The elevator doors banged together a few times before closing completely, like some invisible object was there between them. Then there was silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cawood was coming through on the radio and everyone was starting to get a buzz when the stillness of the evening was interrupted by the sound of a car lumbering up the hill through the mud.

"Who else knows we're up here?"

"Don't know."

"Who is it?"

"Looks like a Chrysler."

"Naw. Ford."

"LTD."

"It's a shit-brown, deputy-dog mobile."

"Goddam Barney Fifes."

Somehow a couple of deputies managed to make it up the hill in their old, run-down LTD. Their interior light came on and they stepped out in their chocolate colored uniforms with everyone else. A couple of guys lit up cigarettes to hide the marijuana smell, and everyone else stood around in disbelief.

"Wha'chew boys a'doin' up here?"

Coach spoke up. "Just havin' a beer and listenin' to the game."

"We had uh call that vandals wuz pullin' up gravestones up here. Yew boys ain't vandals is ye?"

Somebody laughed and a couple others shook their heads. Coach commented on the upstanding reputations of everyone there and pointed out the undisturbed graves which the deputies could plainly see with their flashlights.

\* \* \* \* \*

Slump sort of snickered as he thought about that night and it caught the trooper's attention in the confined area of the elevator. The trooper turned to him as the bell dinged and the doors slowly opened to the check-in area of the jail.

"Hey, Slump."

"Hey, Leebo," Slump replied to the jailer. "Been goin' to the flea market lately?"

"Ever Sunday."

"Nice knife. That a new 'un?"

"Yep. Bought it last Sunday." Leebo pulled the knife from its sheath on his belt and handed it to Slump. He turned it around in his hands and admired the edge underneath the desk light. The trooper paused for a moment, shook his head, and went about his job of setting up the breathalyzer.

"Trooper Frances?" Leebo said as Slump handed back the knife. "That things been a actin' up. Better let Sourdough over there look at it for ye."

Sourdough was the janitor of the courthouse, of most of the town for that matter. He used to be the day time janitor at the elementary school 'til he showed the place on his ass where he'd recently gotten a tetanus shot to some fourth graders. Now he only worked nights.

"Hit's a flip floppin'," he said.

"What does that mean?" Trooper Frances replied.

Sourdough picked up the edge of the device and dropped it hard on the table top. He looked at it closely, smiled and turned back to the trooper. "Hit's



ready now, buddy."

While the trooper fastened a sanitary mouthpiece to the machine, Sourdough swept over to where Slump and Leebo were standing.

"Hey buddy. You know whut a fifty-six school bus looks like? I drove one once." He stood close to Slump and looked right in his eyes. "Hey buddy. You think I really drove that bus?"

Sourdough went on about how many gears the transmission had, and how he had to double clutch it to get it to shift. Slump remembered, back in grade school, how they would tease Sourdough about the taps on his shoes and make fun of the way they could always hear him coming before they could see him. They would talk him into running and sliding on those taps, down the slick, green-painted hallways. Then laugh at him when a teacher would call him down like he was one of the other kids.

Slump remembered the way Sourdough would empty the trashcans, sticking one foot into the can to pack it all in. They called it the "Sourdough dance" and referred to it any time they saw someone else do that. They all thought Sourdough got a bum rap on that ass showing thing.

"Hey buddy. You ever been on a school bus?" He

spoke extra slowly so Slump would know he was talking to him. The trooper interrupted.

"Mr. Mathews. Blow in this please. You must blow hard. You must blow long and hard enough for the buzzer to sound. You must not stop blowing until I tell you to. Begin."

\* \* \* \* \*

Coach had it all under control. He was just finishing up his detailed description of how they were only having a couple of beers, listening to the game, and off the road, too, bothering nobody, peaceful as can be, and throwing in that part about the 'Cats being ahead by ten midway through the first half helped because the LTD didn't have a regular radio. And, just as the deputies were about to get back in that thing and leave, Nelson sat down in Special Ed's Honda.

"Hang on there now," one deputy said, reaching for his gun and swinging his flashlight around in the same motion. The light went across his face and for the first time Slump could see how old that deputy really was. The light settled on Nelson and glinted off the thirty-eight's blue barrel as the pistol shook in the deputy's seventy-year-old hand.

"Git outta that car right now. I don't know none uh

you boys. Now jus' hole still," he said, cocking the revolver.

"Woah now."

"Shit!"

"We ain't doin' nothin', deputy."

Nelson got out of the car with his hands on his head. The gun was pointed in his general direction, but everyone was sort of standing around in a half circle and the gun was shaking so badly in the deputy's hand that Slump thought hard about just diving into the brush and taking his chances. But he knew that any sudden movements here in the dark might get somebody killed.

"I was just puttin' my cig' out," Nelson said.

"Come out from between them cars," the deputy mumbled, trying to sound authoritative.

"Man, put that gun away."

"Yore scarin' the piss outta me."

Even the other deputy looked scared, never bothering to get his gun out, too.

"Jimmy, git on the box and call for a backup. Let's us all go down to the court house and straighten this thing out."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Point-one-one," the trooper said after using

Sourdough's drop on the breathalyzer two more times.

"Shit, that ain't even drunk," Slump said.

"Point-one-zero is impaired in this state."

Slump said nothing else and followed the trooper to the cell door where Leebo asked him if he had a knife on him and Slump said he did and gave it to Leebo along with his shoe laces. Shoe laces were taken from all inmates since old man Chaney had hung himself in the drunk tank two weeks earlier with his and his belt when he sobered up after being on a four month binge.

Leebo closed the cell door behind him and Slump walked over to the pay phone in the cell and dialed Bloomer's number. He hadn't talked to her or Pam in months, but he knew Bloomer was the one to get him out the quickest.

\* \* \* \* \*

The second LTD rumbled up the rutted road, spitting gravel and throwing mud and sliding to a stop inches from the first one with the old deputy and his partner standing beside it.

"Damn, how'd he get that car up here," Mumblypeg said.

While Slump and the others watched this LTD pull up, some of them gave excuses for why they shouldn't be taken

in.

"Man, I get carsick."

"We cain't all fit."

"You'll kill us goin' down the hill."

"I'll walk."

"Me too."

"My Granny finds out, she'll have a stroke."

When the eight of them were actually being loaded into the two cruisers' back seats, the talk turned more serious.

"Man, I know Judge Cranville."

"I'm only sixteen."

"Slump, here, dates Cranville's daughter, Pam. His brother's runnin' for mayor, too. Deputy, yore gonna get in trouble."

"At least put me in the cruiser with the radio. The game's on!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Slump heard Bloomer before she even got off the elevator. She was talking loud and telling everyone she saw what to do. The trooper acted like he didn't want to hear it, until she got really close and whispered something to him that only he could hear. Leebo opened the door to the cell a few moments later.

"What's wrong with you?" was the only thing she said 'til they got in her car. "Where's your car at?" she asked as she pulled out from the courthouse and onto the street.

"'Bout two miles from the Hop," he replied.

"The what?"

"The parking lot beside the DQ. The Hop."

"Whatever. You're lucky he didn't catch you with anything besides beer."

"I don't do that no more."

"That's not what I hear. You get in trouble like that, I can't do a thing."

"I know."

"Pam would be heartbroke, she ever finds out about this. I got him to reduce the charge to a traffic citation."

"What is it?"

"'Drinking beer on the highway.'"

"Never heard of that one."

"Be glad I talked him into it. If it had been one of those real troopers from Pikeville, or even the Morehead post, you might not have been so lucky."

Slump looked out the window as they passed the Hop and rubbed his fingers over the velvet like cushioning of

her Lincoln's door panel. The parking lot was still empty. The DQ was closed now and silhouetted from a light near the change machine for the car wash stalls behind the building. Slump forgot about where he was for a moment, and wondered if there were other restaurants that had car wash stalls out back.

\* \* \* \* \*

The back seat of that LTD was cramped. Slump was in the car that had Mumblypeg in it. Slump was no light weight, but Mumbly weighed nearly two-eighty back then. Coach was small enough to sort of sit on Mumbly and Special Ed's knees. This also gave him the added vantage point of being next to the wire screen behind the deputies' heads.

"You guys are in trouble," he said. "When Cranville hears about this, you're fired. You'll be lucky to be goddam security guards at Super America. Fuckin' goddam Barney Fife's."

At the courthouse Coach refused to tell them who he was, he had hidden his driver's license at the graveyard somewhere. Zig told them his name was Earl Harp, a mysterious pseudonym that often appeared on school rolls and nobody ever knew where it originated. Special Ed said his name was Gus Hall, the name of some guy who ran

for president every four years on the communist ticket. Only Nelson gave his real name. And since he gave them his social security number too, they concentrated on him. Mumbly's uncle, Big Paul--the former county coroner who was now the circuit court clerk--showed up before they got to Slump , and in fifteen minutes they were out of there.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bloomer made a U-turn and pulled onto the shoulder behind Slump's car. She put hers in park and turned to Slump. He was still looking out the passenger side window and admiring the door panel.

"Pam will graduate next year. She'll be back here to teach at the new middle school--if it's finished by then. She's coming in for the summer, should be here in a few days. You know, you could come up to the house, swim in the pool like you guys used to do."

"I gotta go."

"Don't you be out nowhere tonight. You get picked up again, I can't help you. Just go home, why don't you?"

"I'm goin' to the Hop, maybe catch a ride from somebody there."

"The lot was empty when we came by."



"It's still early," he said. She looked back at him in disbelief.

"You can follow me and take my keys if you want. I'm not stupid, Bloomer. I appreciate you helping me out, but you ain't gonna have to do it no more. Not tonight, anyway."

She followed him to the Hop, and slowed and waved as he pulled in. He circled the DQ and parked in the vacant lot facing the road. He turned his headlights off and left the parklights on in case anyone he knew came by. He shut the motor off and pulled his ashtray loose and the hidden baggy from beneath it. He got his Frisbee from below his seat and began breaking a bud up on its smooth, flat underbelly. The papers that were also hidden there had fallen out of reach into the empty space inside the console next to the hump in the floorboard.

"Now here's a jam even Bloomer cain't help me out of," he thought, nearly laughing out loud and sighing in disbelief. He thought about what she said about Pam and the times they had spent together. He wondered how a mother could be so out of touch with the way her daughter really was, how sheltered and upstanding a life she thought Pam lived. Then he thought of his own family and their not knowing what he did after dark either.

"Difference is, mine don't give a shit."

He leaned hard, seeing the papers and trying to figure out how he was going to get to them when the headlights went across his face and the red BMW pulled in next to him.

"Hey, Slump."

"Hey, Pam. When'd you get in?"

"Just now. Thought I'd stop by the Hop before I went home. See what was up."

"It's hoppin'," Slump said sarcastically. He turned his attention back to the papers. "Hey, your hands are small. See if you can reach down in here and get this for me."

She rolled up her window and got out, being careful not to hit his car with her door. She squeezed between the cars and he watched her small waist and denim shorts flash in his sideview mirror as she came around to the passenger side of his car. She opened the door and got in.

"I been thinkin' about you," she said, reaching into the console area and pulling out the papers.

"I been thinkin' about you, too."

He quickly rolled one up, lit it, and passed it to her. She took a long, slow draw and passed it back to

him as he started the car and turned on the headlights. He turned it between his fingers wondering where they could go that evening. He drew the smoke in, letting it fill his lungs, and handed it back to her. He squinted to his left through the exhaled smoke and thought of the risk of going through town, of getting pulled twice in one night, driving around in this obviously marked car. He wondered what trooper Frances would think if he passed them on the highway tonight. He looked to his right and watched her closely as her delicate fingernails held it tightly to her lips, gently inhaling again and reaching it back to him. He turned the ignition off and pushed in the knob for the lights. Over her shoulder he could see the marquee beneath the DQ sign. It read "Try our new car wash brushes." He wondered if they were grilled or deep fried.

## Christmas At Grandpa's

Dad wheeled the Ford off the road and up the steep driveway toward the house. I could see the smoke from the fireplace and the lights creeping through the windows. The Ford easily navigated the incline despite the two or three inches of snow already on the ground. The four high gearing helped out when roads were bad like this, but Dad always said his driving skills and other minor things got us where we were going.

"Good tires," he muttered.

We'd never spent Christmas up here before. We almost didn't this year because of the weather forecast. This was going to be the first Christmas since Grandma died. I knew that was why we were coming here this year. Mom thought Dad might like to be here, and though a little hesitant, he agreed. Dad wasn't much on Christmas. Oh sure, he liked the ones just the three of us spent together. But I don't think he liked the idea of having to go somewhere to spend a holiday. Dad liked things simple and uncomplicated. I think it bothered him that our house wasn't big enough for all his family to visit us.

The headlights moved across the roof of the house as

we crested the top of the driveway. The snow was starting to fall again. I hoped it would be a lot. I'd never seen a white Christmas.

Dad parked the Ford and we walked to the house. The box I carried had food so I put it on the stove. Aunt Beth was standing there with outstretched arms.

"Hello there, young man. What'd yore mommy make this year?"

"Turkey, potato salad, and some dressin'."

"Now, what grade are you in this year?"

"Third grade," Mom said, answering for me. "And a straight 'A' student, too."

"Lord, ye've grown so much. When was last time I seen ye?"

"Thanksgivin'," I said, as I went with Dad to the living room where the men were. I hoped there would at least be one kid my age, but I wasn't counting on it. There didn't seem to be anybody my age from Dad's side of the family.

Uncle Charles was there, and Dad's cousin Greg, and somebody named Arnold that I'd never seen before who had funny looking hair. He was asking if I had been out hitchhiking and Dad had picked me up to get me out of the snow.

"No sir," I said, as Dad put his arm around my shoulder. Dad explained that Arnold was my Great Uncle. I guess Arnold was just poking a little fun, his way of saying hello to someone my age.

"Say hi to Grandpa, son. Then we'll go eat."

I walked over to Grandpa. He sat in that old, green recliner where he always sat. That thing looked older than him. Dad always joked that it was the prototype recliner, the first one ever made. Grandpa said that it was the only one that his butt fit.

He looked the same as last time I saw him. His hair was a little mussed, he looked like he hadn't shaved in about three days, and he was wearing pajamas and house shoes.

"Hello, young man," he said with a serious voice.

"Hi."

"Glad you could make it. Hope the roads weren't too bad?"

"No sir."

Grandpa nodded his head approvingly. "Well, go on in the kitchen and eat. There's time for jawin' later."

"Yes sir," I said, and ran to the kitchen.

"Good lookin' boy you got there, Bobby," I heard someone say. It sounded like Charles. He was Grandpa's

little brother and only a couple of years older than Dad. I think that when they were in high school, they ran around together a lot. Mom likes to talk about those days, sometimes. But Dad thinks that talk like that will influence me in the wrong way.

We sat in the kitchen, Mom, Aunt Beth and me. The men stayed in the living room with Grandpa. He rarely got out of that recliner, and there usually wasn't room at the table for everybody anyway. The women would make sure the men had what they needed, then when they finished waiting on the men, they ate by themselves in the kitchen.

Mom's turkey was perfect. Aunt Beth wanted everyone to try the cranberry salad she made, but I hated the stuff and wasn't about to. When I thought nobody was looking, I scraped it off my plate into my napkin and some of it fell on the floor. Of course Mom saw.

"Pick that up," she said. "Use yore napkin."

I got out of my chair and on one knee so I could do a good job and get all of it. That was when I saw the underside of the kitchen table and remembered. It was a drawing I had made that I forgot about. I sat under there one day when Grandma was making apple pies, gotten out some crayons and drawn a masterpiece. It was a

train. There was an engine, a couple of passenger cars, coal cars, and a red caboose. I made it so you could remove a passenger car by taking out the table leaf. I used a whole red crayon on that caboose. I couldn't believe that it was still there. It just sat there, hidden beneath the table top.

I finished cleaning up my mess, and threw the napkins I used in the trash. I had one last bite of turkey and got up from the table to watch the snow come down. This was going to be a long night, a night of listening to the adults tell about their experiences and not bothering to explain things to me so I could understand what they were talking about. I was the only kid there, it was Christmas eve, and I had to make the best of it.

I got out the best gift I'd gotten so far this year, a rubber-band powered airplane that flew like a bird. It was folded up in my jacket pocket. You just popped the wings in place, wound it up with this little crank below the tail, and it flew. It was too cold and dark to fly it outside, and it was not an inside toy--at least not in our house.

I twirled around and held the bird out like it was flying. I could feel the air pulling at its wings and



imagined it soaring above the ground, over houses and roads, totally free to go wherever I wanted it to go.

We flew around the kitchen and down the hall to the living room. Charles and Arnold moved to the kitchen, and only Grandpa remained in the living room. I stood next to him, spinning the bird around in my hand. He sat in that recliner, staring out the window at the snow, watching it cover up the yard and driveway. I thought about the snow, and I thought about the bird, and I thought about Grandpa stuck in that awful, green recliner.

After a few minutes of watching me twirling with the bird he said, "Yore Grandma always loved the snow. You like the snow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yore Grandma used to say she'd ruther have snow than rain any day. Rain in the winter made mud. Snow just made snow, and icicles."

He leaned over and spat in his coffee can. Grandpa always had a chew after he ate. He had an old coffee can he used which sat between the wall and the side of the recliner. He adjusted himself in his seat and cocked his head to one side.

"Now, what's that?"

"It's a bird, Grandpa. You wind it up an' it flies." I wound up the crank a few times and let go of it, keeping a good grip on the bird itself. The wings flapped as it tried to free itself from my grip.

"How far you reckon it'll fly?" he asked.

"I just got it this mornin'. I've never flown it before."

"Just got it this mornin'? With tomorrow Christmas?"

"Mom and Dad and me already opened our gifts from each other. We always open them on Christmas eve, but since we was comin' here we opened them before we came."

"Well, what's Santa gonna bring ye?"

"Prob'ly nothin'. Dad says we ain't got much money this year so I guess I won't get much more'n what I already got--some gloves, a new sled, this bird, and some drawing markers."

"Don't you believe in Santa?"

"Nope. I'm too old for all that kid stuff, Grandpa. I'll be nine years old soon."

"So?"

I wondered where he was going with this. I'd been told all about the Santa conspiracy by my friends. My parents just didn't feel like admitting it to me. They

wanted to keep me in the dark. They didn't want me to know the truth about Santa Claus--the man who could fly around the world in one night. The man who made all those toys with some little, short guys helping him. Funny how they still stamped "made in Japan" on them.

"So?" he said again.

"I quit believin' in Santa Claus, Grandpa. My friends told me their parents just pretended to be Santa and that he never even existed."

Grandpa reached around his chair for his coffee can. I spun around again with the bird. I could see the snow falling outside in the front porch light. The large flakes twisted and twirled in the evening breeze. He placed the can back in its crescent-stained resting spot.

"You afraid what yore friends might say if you said you knew there was a Santa Claus?"

"I don't care what they say."

"Good. Don't be too quick to believe what people tell ye."

He sort of sighed and looked back out the window. I spoke up again, "So, you sayin' there really is a Santa?"

"All I'm sayin' is, sometimes you just got to believe in somethin' no matter how ridiculous you might think that somethin' is." Dad entered the room. "We

just been watchin' the snow fall," Grandpa said. "Why don'chee wind that bird up and let 'er have a fly in the kitchen? That's the biggest room in the house."

"Can I, Dad?"

"Well, if yore Grandpa says it's okay..."

"Thanks Grandpa!" I yelled as I ran to the kitchen. I heard Dad ask Grandpa if he was coming to watch, but didn't wait for Grandpa's reply. Dad followed me into the kitchen and I guess Grandpa stayed in his recliner.

Dad helped me plan the launch--we talked about how the flight should go, and decided to turn the tail piece hoping that it would make the bird fly in a circle around the room. We paced around the kitchen table where the women still sat, eating pie and smoking cigarettes, and tried to calculate how many turns of the crank we should give it. Dad seemed very interested in the bird and how it would fly, and took his time to try to help me plan out everything that we could think of.

Finally, after several practice runs of winding the crank and seeing how long the wings would flap without actually letting the bird go, we were ready. I wound up the rubber band the number of times we had agreed on, adjusted the tail piece a little more, and let it go.

The wings flapped just like a bird's. It climbed

and pushed the air and pulled itself up near the ceiling. It turned to the left before hitting the wall, flew past the back door, turned again near the other wall, and came back towards me. It was out of our reach as it passed me, making another trek around the kitchen. It passed the refrigerator, the stove, and the kitchen window. And just as it passed above the kitchen door, with everyone "ooohing" and "aaahing," as it passed overhead out of our reach, wings clawing the air, keeping it aloft, I saw him at the back door window.

His cheeks were red and his eyes lit up as he saw the bird go by the window. White hair covered his head and he had a full, white beard. He smiled and waved and he was gone.

The bird finished its flapping, its wings without power, and glided to a stop near my feet. I ran to the door, nearly stepping on the bird. I looked out the window. I turned to everyone in the room. They all looked back at me.

"What's wrong, son?" Dad asked.

"Didn't you see him? Any of you?"

"See who?"

"...at the window, at the back door window. He was lookin' in as the bird flew by. At the door!" It was on

the edge of my tongue. It fought its way out of my mouth. "Santa Claus! Santa Claus at the back door window!"

They stared at me. I grabbed the door handle and ran out into the snow. He couldn't have gone far. He had to be there somewhere. Footprints! I looked for footprints. Nothing. No footprints except for the ones that Mom and Dad and me had made. No deer tracks, no sleigh marks, no nothing.

Dad came out into the yard with me. He put his hand on my shoulder and we stood there as the snow drifted and swirled in the back porch light.

"You really see him?" Dad asked.

"Yes, sir. He was lookin' in the window when the bird went by it. He smiled, looked up at the bird, waved, and now he's gone. Did I really see him, Dad?"

"You did if you think you did."

We walked back inside. I picked up the bird, folded its wings and placed it back inside my jacket pocket. I walked to the living room and sat on the sofa across from Gandpa.

"It's a beautiful night," he said. "Yore Grandma always loved the snow. I never watched it much, till lately. Seems like I was always too busy, before. You

like the snow, don'chee?"

"Yes sir."

"Looks like it's gonna be a white Christmas this year."

I looked out the window and picked at the quilt Grandma made that was draped over the back of the couch. Grandpa lifted his bare feet and pushed the leg support out from the recliner with one hand and reached for his coffee can with the other. He spat in the can and placed it back in its tobacco stained resting spot in the corner, next to his snow covered house shoes.

## The Back of Larry's Head

My dearest Debra,

I write now to reply to your letter of inquiry concerning my health. It is so kind of you to be concerned. I greatly miss the times we shared--our moments of intimacy. It would be so wonderful to hear your voice, see your face, or hold your hand again as I once did. But I regret that I may never do so again.

I know from your letter that you have been trying to contact me by phone since you heard of my predicament, no doubt on some tabloid show. And you may think that what they are saying about me is an exaggeration of the truth, as no doubt most of what they say is. But let me tell you here and now that what they are saying about me and my affliction is not only true, but is not even near to the reality of what my life has become.

I guess in order for you to understand fully what has transpired since my moving to this place, I must start in the beginning. The beginning--how long ago it seems, how unnaturally short a span of time has turned into a life of grief and misery. For I am surely being punished by God or whomever for some unknown deed--and only He or She knows what that deed is, for I have



wracked my brain with every unkind word I have ever spoken, every unkind deed or thought, and every instance I can think of where I may have strayed.

As you know, I moved to this small village some six weeks ago, Tuesday 3 October to be exact, as I was quite taken with the place when I first visited here back in the summer. I loved it for its solitude, the mountainous terrain, and the abundance of streams and untouched forest. It seems odd, no doubt, hearing that I would wish for such desolation--forsaking the social activities you and I were so involved in. And I know I never told you I was leaving, but I thought perhaps a clean break was in order, and maybe I was a bit embarrassed to admit that I could not handle the pressure, the stress of daily performance in the office and the never ending parade of numbers.

I imagine now that you could have saved me, could have made me quit that rat race and together we could have defeated the boredom that my life had become. I imagine us married now, back in Boston, you with your practice, me with that best seller and at home with our children, raising them the way our families had done before. These are the only things I have now--my imaginings of how it could have been. But of course

there's my journal.

I have kept a rigorous record of every day and every thing that has happened since I got here, Deb. You will find it and other important items in the box that this letter is attached to. You must read it carefully and help me, Deb, if I am still here to help. You must find out what happened, what caused this great misfortune to be put on me, for I cannot. I have scoured through the pages, rereading every line, reliving every moment, hoping, grasping on every word for an answer. But for me, there is none.

I found a lovely cottage to rent not far from the town, near the Randall's woods. A Mrs. Holbrook rents it to me, a sweet old lady. The property has been in her family for generations. It is truly a glorious scene--with a stream and ponds and cattle roaming round the sides and back. I set my workstation up there, where I could write and turn to nature for my inspiration, foregoing any attempt at a living room as I did not expect to be doing much entertaining. I was forcing myself to work, Deb. That was why I was here. That is why I left all that I had back in Boston--I had the idea for a book, that great American novel, I just had to make myself write it. Now all I have to show for my efforts

are in this box--a journal, film clips, and medical records as bizarre as anything ever put down as fiction.

I devoted my first week here to getting settled in. I put most of my acquired property in storage before leaving Boston and brought only my computer, my clothing and toiletries. The house was partially furnished upon my arrival with the necessities--a small bed, a night stand, a table and a few chairs. I purchased an old oaken desk from the antique store in town. You would love the town, Deb. It looks like something out of a Rockwell painting, with old style shops lining the streets leading to the courthouse and post office at its center. It seems totally untouched by modern day conveniences--no shopping mall, no all-night markets, not even a Wal-mart. I must say that from all aspects it seems to me that I was stepping back in time.

I woke that first Saturday at dawn with something of a headache, took some aspirin and thought little of it. I glanced through the newspaper and ate a light breakfast of flakes and fruit. I remember feeling a tingling sensation above the nape of my neck which was followed by a peculiar itching. I shrugged it off as possibly having to do with the differing climate or just being in this strange, new place. I also supposed that maybe I had

developed a little bit of dandruff due to some hygiene changes, for I had not showered in more than a day.

I sat at the blank computer terminal, sipped my coffee and gazed at the dew-covered grass with its peculiar bluish tint common to this area. The sun was coming up behind the house and I watched it rise on the gray, weathered, knot-covered sides of the barn. It was a truly inspiring scene. I took another sip of coffee, put my hands on the keyboard, and reached back to scratch that nagging itch on the back of my head. Then a rather strange thing happened. My finger slid through.

At first I didn't realize what had happened. I thought that perhaps I was not fully awake, or that my mind was in some way playing an awful trick on me. But I sat there in my bathrobe, at my computer, staring blankly out the window, with the index finger of my right hand penetrating my scalp and wiggling around inside my head.

My finger was inside my head and I could feel nothing with it. I removed and replaced it several times. It was as though the surface of my head had a small hole in it. I wondered at the time if I had somehow ruptured a membrane of some sort--if my scratching could have been perhaps a bit too intense. I rubbed my finger around my head and through my hair very

ordinarily, pretending to myself that it had not happened. But when my finger hit this one spot, right at the very uppermost point where it is still the back of my head and not the top, where my hair has its peculiar little swirl, my finger just slid in.

I tell you I was more than a little concerned. I laughed out loud to myself, repeatedly fingering the back of my head. I can also tell you that it was not unlike that first experience in the back seat of my father's Oldsmobile. But once passing that rim, there was nothing inside. It was as if my finger were inside a sphere or other open space. There was no feeling of moisture or tissue whatsoever. I imagined it felt like the opening was pulling my finger in, which I dismissed at the time, but later learned was quite true.

I tried to remain calm. "Some sort of scalp problem," I thought, "or perhaps a hygiene thing." I quickly showered and after discovering that the opening persisted, got in my car and drove to town in search of the local doctor, not expecting to find one on a Saturday.

I located the office and to my surprise, it was indeed open. Dr. Franklin was a pleasant enough man, a bit overweight for his height perhaps, but stockily

built. He had the smell of liquor on his breath and in all respects was the epitome of the stereotypical small town drunken doctor. It was my visit that day and the days following that sobered him up. It was also my visit that day and his recurring contact with me that eventually ended his miserable life.

At first he did not believe me. But when he stood behind me in the examining room and watched as I poked my index finger into my head, up to the knuckle, and removed it without leaving a trace of opening or blood or even moving a hair on my head, his reply was, "My God." He had me do it repeatedly as he peered closely at the event.

He tried to get his own finger to pass through, but it would not, probably due to the fact that his large, stubby fingers were too big for the opening. He got out one of his ear examining tools, as I had guessed he would, and slid the tip of it into the opening and looked inside. He said he saw only blackness, but quickly withdrew it and refused to repeat the experiment.

He sat on his stool a long time that day, asking questions about my diet and background and how I came to be in this part of the country. He seemed very rattled that day, Deb, and his hands shook violently. Several

times he opened his desk drawer to have a nip at the single malt scotch hidden inside, and several times he closed the drawer without cracking the lid.

He seemed very unsure of himself and at last decided on an experiment with a curved steel instrument that was in many ways like an instrument a dentist uses for examining teeth, except this one had a blunt end instead of a sharp one. He said he wanted to feel around on the inside of the rim to see if he could determine anything that might lead to our discovering its origin.

Once the tip had penetrated the opening, he moved it around and turned it over in his badly shaking hand to apply pressure to what should have been the inside wall of my head. At the time I could not tell what he was doing, the back of my head being not at all in a good viewing position for me. But he told me, and it was several days later I must add, that he turned the curved instrument around trying to find that inner wall, and had it at such an angle that he thought the tip of it must surely be protruding from my skull. But it was not. "Impossible," he mumbled. In that instant, his hand shook so violently and he was so taken aback at this abnormal occurrence that he dropped the instrument through the opening.

I repeat this now as I came to know it later, for the instant that instrument left his hand and completely passed through the opening, I was wholly overwhelmed by a staggering experience that is nearly indescribable. I could both feel and see the instrument. It was not a feeling and seeing in the physical sense, however. In my mind I knew the instrument and how it came to be. I knew in an instant all there was to know about it and how it ended up in Dr. Franklin's office. I saw the assembly line and felt the surgical steel as it was cast for the handle. I felt it spinning on the machinery as the tip was installed. I felt it fall from the assembly line into a container with others like it. I felt the confinement as it was boxed and shipped with others just like it. I felt the motion as it sat in a salesman's car, knew his name and the day that it was purchased by Dr. Franklin's receptionist. I saw and felt and knew every man, woman, and child that had ever come in contact with this instrument. All that I felt in that one split second as it passed my scalp and entered my head. And then the sensation was gone.

He took x-rays to try to locate the instrument inside me, took them of every square inch of my body from head to toe, to little avail. While he frantically



snapped those all-seeing photos, I tried to express the experience I had just had. It was difficult. It took my breath, left me dizzy but exhilarated. I felt more alive as that instrument passed through my head than I had ever felt before. The feeling slowly slipped away, like some kind of dream, and the details became fuzzier with every passing moment.

My journal became my record--my memories of the details of every object that passed through my head, Deb. And there were many. For once the word got out that you could send something through the back of the stranger's head and have it leave this Earth as we know it forever, people came from all over to both witness and participate in the phenomenon. And the word got out blindingly fast.

With nothing more he could do for me, Dr. Franklin sent me home with a vial of aspirins and anti-itch powder. I spent the next couple of days at home and alone, writing in my journal about my trip to the town and what had happened so far. I tried to catch every detail, Deb. Every important moment.

I went back to his office on Monday. I could not keep my hand away from that place on my head and it seemed to me that the opening was getting larger. While pressing around with his fingers to try to measure the

circumference of the opening, his index finger went through, which convinced us that it had grown larger.

He tried a different experiment that day--a pencil with a length of twine tied around it. He slowly and shakily eased the pencil through the opening. I remember he told me as he was doing this that he had not had a drink since our encounter Saturday and I thought to myself at that time that perhaps there was some good to this after all.

When the pencil had fully penetrated my head, I was again flooded with its historical background--the beginnings of its existence on the assembly line, its packaging, its shipping. I saw it fall from the notebook of a small girl as she picked up her books from the table in this very office. I saw his nurse later pick it up and put it in a holder on his desk. I saw every time he ever picked it up and every word he ever wrote with it.

When I came out of this exhilarating trance, Dr. Franklin was asking me to look in the mirror he was holding. He asked if I had just had a similar experience with this pencil as I had had when the instrument went through on my last visit and I told him that I had. He told me that the twine was marked off in increments of measured feet and that if I would hold the small mirror,

he would carefully attenuate the pencil further.

He said that the length of line totaled twelve feet--thinking at the time that that was more than enough--but discovering after passing eight of these increments that perhaps it was not. He also relayed two other startling facts--the pencil was being drawn in, and the tension on the twine seemed to become greater as the pencil progressed.

We were nearing the end of the line and he said he was going to see if he could pull the pencil back out. But, quite suddenly, its progression ceased. He picked up his ear peering device. I could see his face in the mirror, the lines of tension and hesitation on his forehead, the worried look in his eyes. He took two short, deep breaths and leaned in close to have a look.

Much like the last time he peered inside my head, his first words were, "My God."

As he peered into my head, he said that he could see a sidewalk and the length of white twine stretching down to the pencil which was lying there near the curb. After a few moments of silence, which seemed like an eternity to me as I stared fixedly into my hand-held mirror, he jumped back and the remaining length of line quickly shot through the opening.

After my elation from the complete length of line passing through was over, he told me he had seen a hand reach down and pick the pencil up. He said he tried to adjust his viewing angle to follow the upward movement of the pencil in the hand, and doing so could see cars in the road next to the sidewalk, and stores across the street. On one of those stores was a sign. He was not quite sure, he said, but the sign he got a glimpse of appeared to have been in French.

This all may seem hard to believe, Deb, but upon repetition of the experiment several times with a paperclip and another, shorter length of twine, we learned three very important things concerning what we came to call the portal in my head. One: while an object is in transition from this side to that (like the length of twine holding the pencil) a person may view the other side. Two: that other side is not inside my body. Three: that other side changes with each transitional passing.

Dr. Franklin said he saw urban scenes, rural scenes, and positions and placements both indescribable and indiscernible to him. He said that at times he saw no more than open air, other times an object so close to his view point or moving so quickly that he could not relate

its identity. Much to my dismay, our questions only led to other questions.

On my way home from this second examination, a woman on the street stopped me and asked if I was the stranger with that thing in my head. This was my first knowledge that the town had become aware of my problem. I had noticed stares on my way into his office that morning and was suspecting such, but this was the first concrete evidence I had obtained.

I told her yes that I was indeed that selfsame stranger and what of it. She asked me in her contracted dialect if it were true what people said--that something that went through my head disappeared and would never come back. I told her that I was not sure about the coming back part, but that it was true that whatever went through did no longer remain here.

At first talking to her I felt angry that my personal life was being discussed around town with such abandon, that everyone knew this as common knowledge so quickly. Then I became enchanted with the idea of a community that was so open and willing to accept this whole idea without questioning their own sanity in the process.

Perhaps my being a stranger made having this

personal problem acceptable: For that was what it very much was to them, just the stranger's personal problem, as if it were expected for someone, an outsider, who came into this community, to have some dark and mysterious secret that they would all eventually find out about. In this way I was both placed apart and embraced by them--I was unique, an object to be observed from afar. Yet I was also someone for them to gossip about, a genuine oddity, not some curiosity to gape about on television, but right there among them.

She told me there on the street that she was recently divorced and asked how long it took for something to go through. I told her it was instantaneous. She asked what the biggest thing to go through had been. I told her that I guessed it was my finger. She asked which one and I held up my index finger to show her.

This conversation seemed as customary to us, as commonplace as if we were talking of trading dogs or guns or any other items at the local flea market. She seemed genuinely concerned and asked if I had any discomfort during the transference. I told her, which was probably a mistake at the time, that it was quite the contrary. I deliberately left off the part about the knowledge of the

history of the object and to this day I do not know why I did so. I doubt if she would have made her next request if I had included that information.

As I said, she was newly divorced. She told me she wanted to have nothing to do with her husband or his family anymore and asked, oh so politely, if it would be too much trouble if she tossed her wedding ring in there.

My first thought, Deb, was to say no, to tell her that she might want it back some day and that once it had gone through there would be no way for her to get it back. I also remember thinking that I should tell her that she should pawn it first, and then decide later if she really wanted to get rid of it. But I said none of these things. I freely admit to you here and now, Deb, that I wanted that ring to go through. I wanted that feeling of exhilaration, of exhaustive pleasure that I got when something left this reality through my head. My mouth nearly watered at the idea.

I turned my back to her and told her where to put it and without a word she did.

I was completely and utterly overwhelmed by the emotions and experiences of the ring and the marriage of those two. Seemingly, every nuance of their lives went shooting through my being. I remember little of it

because I lost consciousness, collapsing to the sidewalk in front of the local drug store.

When I came to, I was at home on my couch with Dr. Franklin looking down at me. He said the woman, the former Mrs. Blackburn, had explained everything and he figured out what must have happened. He also said that the headache I was probably feeling was from the collision with the sidewalk that occurred following my collapse. What he did not know was the epiphany of omnipotence and sheer physical pleasure that resulted from that ring going through.

When word got out that the rumors were true and that the former Mrs. Blackburn had harmed me in some way, the townspeople came to visit me in droves with gifts of soups and cakes and pies. But each of them brought something else with them as well. Tucked away inside pockets and purses and in brown paper bags were the objects--the things they wanted to be rid of more than any other.

Some were very literal--broken watches, a single cufflink or earring, old dilapidated jewelry. Others were more symbolic--a lock of hair, patch of clothing, a necklace, chain, or ring given by someone no longer held in high regard. They each had their offerings, they each



had their requests. None were denied.

I would elaborate more here, Deb, but those days are a blur to me. The next couple of weeks I experienced everything every object experienced, and everything every owner experienced while they had that object. I never blacked out again like I did over that first ring. And I started spouting out what I was feeling and seeing as the object went through. I became quite the tribal visionary to them. I learned to write while in the epiphanic trance to keep track of what each object relayed to me for the record's sake as well as to remember it, for the apparitions quickly faded.

One day while I was updating my shorthand scrawl into my journal, a news crew knocked on my door. It was a slow day for transitions, as I had come to call them, so I agreed to let them film the occurrence. I never suspected that a network would pick it up and broadcast it nationally. There were thirty journalists in my yard the next day. And on Friday of that same week, they were talking about me on Oprah and Sally Jesse Raphael.

It seems one of the objects that went through, a bracelet inscribed "*To Peaches*," was found three days later near a car wash off Sunset Blvd. in sunny California. The gentleman who found it, a Mr. Stuart

Ramey, claimed it had fallen out of the sky and hit him near his groin while he was waiting in line to have his convertible washed. Others before him had claimed that they possessed something that had passed through the unknown void between my head and where it landed. None before had been documented as true.

But when Stu Ramey went on The Maury Povich show with that bracelet and seven other people who claimed to have "objects from the void," as the press liked to call them, Dolly Madison Jones who had visited me three days prior and dropped that necklace through, contacted Maury claiming that it was hers. A week later, she and Stu met on Maury's set and quickly fell in love. They married the next day during taping.

The townspeople were enraged that one of their own would run off with someone of such questionable character and marry so quickly. My head was quickly denounced by all three local churches as being the way to the devil. People from the town quit visiting altogether. Fortunately for me, there were others arriving daily from all over the country. I say fortunately because I was becoming quite addicted to these transitions.

Dr. Franklin became more and more concerned for my health and visited me daily. He kept telling me to try

to return to a normal life, that staying inside and shoving things in my head was deteriorating my health, and quite possibly my soul as well. I was angry then, not realizing that of all the people who were visiting me, he was the one person that knew what he was talking about. Not just because he was my doctor, Deb. But because he knew a junky when he saw one. And his formerly blood-shot eyes were looking at one when they looked at me.

He wanted to do some more experiments and I agreed as long as things were passing through. He said he would help me try to slow down a little. I resolved to slow down only after discovering that the opening was getting larger, and worse--visible.

He said it was just a small black spot and I held the mirror and could see it. He wanted to try to measure the rim again and was shocked, as well as I, to learn that the rim, which was a good deal larger than the spot, was now the size of a baseball. It was also becoming as insatiable as I in its hunger. It could pull lightweight objects like paper or clothing in from over two feet away. Dr. Franklin's shirt sleeve was continually getting drawn in while he was trying to examine the rim. But that was not the only thing drawn in that day.

Since the opening was now much larger, Dr. Franklin thought we should repeat the experiment with the pencil and twine from a few weeks ago. He wanted to use a device, a telescope-shaped instrument, to look in while the line held open the doorway. We talked a great deal that day and I noticed how much healthier he looked since he had stopped drinking, maybe even lost a little weight over the last few weeks.

The experiment began, much like before with Dr. Franklin holding the twine in his right hand and the instrument with his left. As he leaned forward to slide the telescope-device into the opening, the pull from the portal caused his wedding ring to slip from his ring finger and slide through. He must have felt it come off for he exclaimed something, dropping the string and the telescope at the same time and grasping at the ring. The ring, twine and telescope all passed through and he thrust his hand in reflexively. The portal pulled him in up to his armpit, and he groped around in fascination for his ring.

I remember coming out of my ecstasy from three things going through at once and seeing his face in my mirror. He was looking to the side and his tongue protruded slightly from his mouth. He looked very much

to me like the young boy trying to get the quarter from the storm drain, stretching to regain it and finding it just out of reach.

I remember him saying he could feel the telescope, or something like it, but he could not pick it up. He said he could also feel wood, like steps, but they were on the same level plane. He said he could feel the telescope-like thing vibrating and that the vibrations were increasing. The last thing I remember directly from that day are his screams and blood splattering in my mirror.

When I came to, someone had placed me on the couch in his office and removed the doctor. I learned from his receptionist that they had rushed him to the emergency room, Deb. His arm had been torn from his shoulder. He died later that night.

I remember some of him today from where his arm went through--bits and pieces of medical school, the face of his wife of thirty years, the son who died in Vietnam. But my worst memory is his arm as I see it being pulled from his body between the train and the railroad tracks where he had so innocently placed it.

That was the last time I intentionally let anything pass through, Deb. And let me tell you that the

withdrawals were as unpleasant as anything imaginable. I was in my bed for nearly a week, unable to sleep or eat, shaking from head to toe. Only Dr. Franklin's nurse Rita visited. People still gathered about with their unwanted commodities, of course, but there were fewer than before.

Men of science loitered outside as well, still wanting me to commit myself to their laboratory for experiment, and the rabble of parasitic people from my past who told all of my former existence. And of course there was the press, wanting to know how I felt after finally killing someone, and how it feels to give up something the rest of them will never experience.

I was starting to feel like myself again around the week of 29 October. My appetite had returned and I felt like writing again. I wrote for two days about my experience coming down and what the withdrawals were like. I wrote a letter to Dr. Franklin's remaining family, a daughter in Pennsylvania, with my regrets and hope of her forgiveness.

On Tuesday 31 October, only a handful of people were lingering. I had visitors from town that day, and for the first time in more than a week, welcomed someone other than Rita into my home. It was the former Mrs.

Blackburn, who had sent through her wedding ring back on that Monday when Dr. Franklin first sent the pencil and twine through. Her child, Harold, was with her. She brought some soup and we talked for about thirty minutes before getting around to my head.

We talked about that Monday and the ring and how relieved she was to be rid of it and how important a role I had played in that. I told her that it was nice of her to say so and expressed my feelings of guilt and self-pity over Dr. Franklin's untimely death. She wanted to know the details of the accident and I reluctantly supplied them. Harold joined us at this point and seemed intent on listening as closely as possible. She asked if I experienced that same exaltation from his arm passing through that I had felt with objects. I told her I did but didn't remember much of it because I blacked out. She said that was probably due to the Lord not wanting me to experience death as Dr. Franklin experienced it and Harold agreed with her.

The discussion took an odd direction as she posed repeated questions of objects that had gone through, as though she needed a complete listing. It was her last question that made me guess what she was up to. She asked if anything living had ever gone through.

I told her no and that I had given up the idea of ever letting anything living or dead go through that damnable passage again. This did not dissuade her and her questions about the possibility persisted. She asked if I thought Dr. Franklin would still be here today if he had not placed his arm across those tracks. I told her I thought there was no reason that he shouldn't be. She asked me what I thought would have happened had he gone completely through. I told her I thought that a moot point because the good doctor was too large to pass through the opening, but that if he could have, there was no reason why he would not have survived had he been able to dodge the oncoming train.

She asked if a smaller person, a child say, could in my opinion survive the transference. I again said that was a moot point as I would have no part in such an outlandish experiment, but hesitantly nodded my belief that the child would come to no harm depending upon where he or she landed on the other side.

She said she was glad to hear that, and little Harold, who was quite small and thin for his age, and who had also managed to sneak around behind my chair while I rambled on about my theory of whether or not a human could or could not survive the ordeal, came running up



behind and dove into the portal.

Having not had a "fix" in over two weeks, well, all I can say Deb, is that it was exhilarating. I nearly blacked out. I saw everything, every misdeed that little cretin had ever performed--throwing rocks off overpasses, torturing animals, bullying smaller children. I saw him sexually molesting his little sister, and I saw his mother sexually molesting him. I saw everything, again I was omnipotent. I also saw the deal his mother made with the television network and the plans for the movie about the first person to go through. I turned to the window and saw the camera crew filming the whole thing, no doubt capturing the ecstasy on my face from having that little boy pass through.

That day I gave my first interview in weeks and it has since been my last. I told all that I knew and her own illegal tape recordings of our conversations and the footage from the film crew did as much to cause her arrest as anything. When they asked me what I saw as the boy went through, I told it exactly as I had seen it. "I just saw water."

They looked everywhere for Harold, everywhere simultaneously you could say, as the network carried everything live. Everybody wanted to be the one to find

child Harold. Looking for the drowned body of an eight-year-old like some morbid Halloween scavenger hunt!

It has been more than a week now since the loss of Harold. I have had no contact with the outside world--even the press has left me. Most everyone has given up on finding that boy, and on finding answers to me and my killing head. They seem to have simply lost interest.

To stop the uncontrolled flow of objects through that damnable black hole, I now wear a football helmet. The coach at the middle school was kind enough to lend me one that was too large for any of the team, and it fits me quite nicely. Much like the Doonsbury character from the comic page of a Sunday paper, I am never seen without it.

But the portal has been stretched too much, and my head along with it. Without my helmet I cannot get near any object smaller than an automobile, and I fear the portal will not be limited to objects of this size much longer. I've already lost chairs, my night stand with everything on it, and various other odds and ends around the house. Yesterday morning I woke in a jolt as I hit the floor--feeling and seeing my bed and linens and pillows and their histories pass before me. I now even wear the accursed thing to bed.

I fear that it has become utterly uncontrollable, that the helmet will soon be unable to contain it and that it will eventually swallow all around me. These thoughts are unfathomable to me. I cringe at the very idea that all reality as I know it could pass through the portal and leave me utterly alone in a universe consisting only of myself. More importantly, I fear that all records of my head will be lost soon if I do not get them away from this insatiable gateway. If they pass through unattended, there is no way of knowing where they may be deposited. This is why I reply to you now, Deb. I am passing them to you, for accounting's sake. I am making you their benefactor, the messenger or carrier of my story. Only you can help me, Deb. Everyone must know what has happened.

Yours Always,

Larry.

## Randall Argyle Joins the Band

I first met him over twenty years ago when I was still in high school. You know how every place has this one weird character everybody knows, like a town drunk, or class clown? Well, Randall was sorta all of those types mixed up in one, except I never saw him drink. Today you know him as a well respected man of the community, but it wasn't always that way. You can ask him if you want and he'll say every word of this is true. Except if you ask him, I bet he'd just make some joke and change the subject.

When I was in high school, I was quite the athlete. I know you can't tell it now, but back then I really took care of my body. I hardly ever drank during football season, and would've been all-state if I hadn't had my bum ankle. You ever play football? That's where Randall first made a name for himself, at ballgames.

Actually it was the pep rallies, or "pepper" rallies as we liked to call them cause we didn't really know what "pep" was. You always knew he was there--you didn't have to see him or anything--you could hear him way off in the distance. He had this really distinctive yell that he would do and I remember like yesterday the first time I

heard it. I was a freshman then, and looked all over the gym trying to figure out what that sound was. It was like a laugh, but it sounded straight from the gut, raspy and full of phlegm--like it was gonna make whoever was doing it bust out coughing, or throw up.

We spent a lot of time in the gym my freshman year. When I was in eighth grade, the high school kitchen exploded and nearly killed two of the cooks. The outside wall of the lunchroom fell out into the street and traffic had to be re-routed for over a week. Seems somebody forgot about the gas or something--I don't know if they ever figured out what happened. They still have gas here? Anyway, that was near the end of that school year, and next year when I was a freshman they still hadn't gotten it fixed. My freshman and sophomore years both--they had us eating cold sandwiches on the gym bleachers.

"Keep your hairy feet off my bleachers. I want to see you walking in the aisles," was what Miss Mable would say. She was the phys. ed. coach then, and the school thought since it was her gym and that everyone ate in there she should have all the lunch duty. She was a stickler for discipline, and wouldn't tolerate nothing. She also made it well known that she did not like lunch

duty, and that some things in life were just thrust upon us. That was what she did with her discipline, made it an example of what she thought life would do, and thrust it upon us. Unless, of course, she liked you or knew your people. Then you could get away with murder. I guess that's sorta what got Randall started because she knew his people, was even related to some Argyles from the next county over. That's a weird name--Argyle. You ever met one other than Randall?

So it was around my sophomore year that his performances started. Like I said, he used to just sit up in the stands somewhere during public events in the gym and do this yell, would really freak some people out. He liked to do his yell from the top row, I heard him say once, since his voice would carry more from up there. But Miss Mable wouldn't let anyone sit up there during lunch, not even her pets. So with all these people gathered in the gym for lunch, he had to find something better to do, a different angle to take--you know, to get people's attention. He was always doing that. He'd come up to you when you were talking to a pretty girl in the hall, real private like, and in his loudest voice yell, "Ain't you gonna kiss her on the jaw!" And he had this catch phrase that he always said, he'd say, "I don't know

nuthin' 'bout that, buddy," and laugh like he just told the funniest joke. We all thought he was a little bit crazy, and of course we'd try to see how far we could get him to go with it. You ever hear him say that?

Anyway, this singing thing--he'd get up in front of a crowd of us in the gym eating our ham and cheese sandwiches with mustard and mayonnaise and start singing Neil Sadaka songs. It was that one that they made into a cat food commercial or something--calendar girl or cat or whatever. He'd sing it at the prettiest girls and embarrass them and we'd all roll on the floor laughing.

At first he just did it during lunch period in the gym. He'd get on the floor, nobody was allowed on the floor with street shoes on but Miss Mable always let Randall, and sing this song and try to see how many faces he could flush. But my sophomore year was a big year for us in football. And as the season went on, we had more pepper rallies during school. The principal, and you'll have to give me a minute on that cause we had a different one all four years I was there, would announce over the speakers in the rooms that there would be a rally at the end of the week--on Friday. The sixth period classes would meet in the gym and the players would come out and be introduced, as if we didn't know them already, and the

cheerleaders would do some cheers and the band would play. They still do that?

Well this particular year, my sophomore year like I was saying, we had a rally almost every week cause the team was doing so well. We probably could've even won the state if I'd been playing but for my bum ankle and all. Anyway, word about Randall's lunch time performances got around and one day the cheerleaders invited him onto the floor to do a song as a joke. He didn't know it was a joke but we all did.

Well, he had always lurked around the cheerleaders, so their invitation wasn't a surprise. And they all acted like they liked him, but of course none of them would ever go out with him. But they would joke with him and cut up as long as he didn't get too close. He'd sneak onto the edge of the floor at the end of a pepper rally and usher the cheerleaders off the floor or act like he was sweeping up or something. Sometimes he'd do that at basketball games too, but we were a football school and not as many people were in the stands during basketball games as there were at the pepper rallies where the whole school was.

So they invited him out there to do a song this one time, had a microphone hooked up and everything. He does



about half of this calendar song in a real timid voice, and everyone laughed so hard that it helped his confidence some and he started singing louder. He was probably thinking the building roar of the crowd was aimed at him, when we were all just watching the clock waiting for the bell to sound and another week of school to be over.

After that day, things changed for him. He became really outspoken, much louder than before. Not that he wasn't already, mind you, but he was downright bothersome now. He would always be bugging the cheerleaders and the prettiest girls, cracking jokes and acting like he was dating every one of them, but now he was bugging the rest of us, too. It was like he could appear out of nowhere, just at the most awkward of moments and embarrass you. You ever had anyone do that?

There was this time I was at my locker, think it was my junior year, and I was talking to Janie. She was my girl at the time, back before she got knocked up by that Blackburn fella from Utah and dropped out of school. The two of us would go to my parent's house after school before I took her home--they both worked, you see. And we were by my locker, minding our own business, and she was showing me the corner of this little nightie thing in her

purse and telling me how she was gonna show me the rest of it at my house. When all of a sudden, Randall comes down the hall and without even hesitating yanks it out of her purse and puts it on his head. She's running down the hall after him and he's yelling and...anyway. They both got three days. I was on the football team most of that year, on the disabled list you might say, and that incident alone did more for my team status than anything, if you know what I mean.

It was right about that same time, my junior year I think, when he got that trumpet. By this time he was a pepper rally mainstay. He closed down every single one of them. They'd give him the last two minutes before the bell rang and he just did whatever and we would roar. People started throwing money at him, mostly pennies, but some threw quarters. We knew quarters would hurt more. So he started playing this trumpet, or acting like he was playing it, but really he was trying to catch the coins. It eventually got so out of hand near the end of the season, that he'd just start blowing in that horn and running around the stage with change flying everywhere.

Miss Mable and the other coaches would try to get people to stop, those coins were damaging the floor they said, but soon something else changed that kept Randall

off the floor altogether. The bomb threats started.

I think it was the start of my senior year, 'late September maybe, the football season had just begun--does it still start in September? Well as you know, there were always a few bomb threats here and there--right around the time of some big test or when those army guys came during the year with their military aptitude test things or whatever they were, some smart guy would pull an alarm. Not that I ever did it, though. But I knew some that did. You probably do, too. Jefferson David, this guy in my class, claimed to know the number of the superintendent and the secret code and could call one in anytime he wanted to. He lied about everything, though. Said his dad split an atom with an ax once. "It just popped," he said.

But what really got the bomb threats going was the dynamite they found behind the football bleachers. No, I'm not joking about that either. You never heard that? Seems somebody--they caught them but I don't remember who it was--put a whole box of dynamite behind the bleachers that they stole from a strip job that was about five miles from the school. The FBI was there and everything, at least that was the word at the time. Guess you just worry about guns here today, huh?

Since they had found actual dynamite on school grounds, the bomb threats became more of a reality to the school board, and the fire department as well. See, before they found that stuff, a bomb threat would only clear the building for five minutes or so. How long does it take now? Sometimes some classes wouldn't even make it outside before they declared it clear and started bringing them back in. This new threat made the fire department have to actually search the building, and we'd spend hours outside on the football field. It took so long sometimes that we'd file into the bleachers to wait, and Randall would perform.

By this time he'd moved up to a tuba. I guess he thought he had a better chance of catching money in that thing than he did with the trumpet. He would march up and down the sidelines bobbing and weaving and trying to catch every penny. He'd yell "Thank you kindly!" between the "um-pas" and flying coins.

He was older than me, got held back a couple of years, but graduated with my class or, as I thought at the time, at least went through graduation. I remember us yelling to him to sing a song as he went across the stage to get his diploma. He almost did it, too. But instead, he just threw kisses to the crowd and yelled "I

love you!" to us as he shook superintendent Bixby's hand.. Yeah, he was quite the cut up in those days.

The school is so different now, don't you think?. When I was here there wasn't even any air conditioning-- except in the library. It was the only way they could get us in there. And the ceilings are all different now, no more of those tiles. But they got rid of those a long time ago, didn't they? That asbestos scare thing.

Well, I can just tell you I was surprised as anything my first day back here substituting. I was walking down the hall toward principal Calhoun's office when I see Randall standing in the music room. His back was to me and he was bent over holding some young girl's hand on some kind of weird horn, and I wasn't sure at first, but I knew it was him. He looked up after a while and turned toward me and smiled, but I don't think he knows who I am. I wanted to go over to him, but I didn't know what to say. We were never friends, really. I don't know that he had any real friends in high school, anyway.

But it did make me think of something he said to me once. I was sitting on the end of the bench at a junior varsity football game and he came down the sideline. He was flirting with the cheerleaders and getting as close

as he could to leading a cheer without actually doing so--guys couldn't be cheerleaders in those days. He came over and slapped me on my shoulder pad and I asked him to hand me some more ice for my ankle, twisted it jumping through that damn hoop at the beginning of the game--the stupid luck.

He got me an ice pack and I said, "Randall, how come you act like you do?"

"How come you act like you do?" he said back.

"No, I mean, how come you get up in front of everybody and act like that?" I asked again.

"How come you get up and act like you do in front of everybody?" he said.

"I don't do nothing," I answered.

"Me neither," he said and smiled.

Well, I never did figure out just what he meant and I can't believe he's changed so much. You know his wife? I couldn't believe it. He was one of those guys you never thought would get married. I talked to her in the lunch room today--we both had lunch duty. She was telling me about meeting him in college and how they fell in love their sophomore year. They were in the band together, can you believe it? He even got a scholarship she said, and won some kind of national competition or

something one year.

They have three kids, all boys, and she just loves it here in the mountains, she said. Hard to believe some woman from up north would ever come to a place so many of us are trying to get out of.

But what am I talking about? I'm back here. You, too. You got a good job now, the new middle school, right? I just get bounced around to whichever school needs a substitute for the day. Lucky for me there's so many misses. Wish the pay was better, though. I'll have to wait my turn, like you and Randall, get my break when somebody retires or gets a DUI or something and gets kicked out. Somebody without tenure, that is. Can't do nothing to you when you get that, can they?

So tell me about your life these days. I been blabbin' this whole time and you haven't said hardly a word. You build a house, start a family? Tell me about it. Me, I never married. Probably never will.